

Committee on Choice

Charge: Develop recommendations to enhance educational options available to South Carolina's students and parents.

"I believe that Americans expect choice in their lives, and I don't think they should make an exception for public schools. South Carolina will have to get behind giving parents more choices within public education"

–Jim Rex

The report issued by the Committee on Choice supports Dr. Rex's vision of making public education in South Carolina "choice-driven," based on two primary considerations: first, matching educational programs to individual student needs and interests can lead to higher achievement; and second, the public wants and expects expanded choices. The Committee summarized its views this way: "Every family in South Carolina should have viable and substantive choices for their children within the public education school system."

The Committee felt strongly that South Carolina should provide state-level leadership to schools and districts to support expanded choice within public education. Its members identified two additional factors critical to the success of school choice initiatives:

School choice options must be substantive and viable. For any option to succeed, teachers implementing the option will need significant professional development.

School choice will require different strategies in different areas. Some districts will need to focus on "in school" options, while others may be able to implement options between and among schools.

Recommendations

1. Dr. Rex should establish an Office of School Choice within the SDE to provide leadership to local districts in planning, implementing, and evaluating choice programs that meet the needs of all students.
2. The Office of School Choice should develop strategies to involve parents in creating viable and substantive choice options and to educate parents about the merits of available options.
3. The Office of School Choice should document successful, research-based choice models and catalog "best practices" and "lessons learned."

4. The SDE should identify easily implemented choice options that could be established statewide beginning as quickly as the 2007–2008 school year.
5. The SDE should promote options that include alternative routes to high school completion, productive work, and success in life.
6. The SDE should assess all laws and regulations (federal, state, and local) that prevent or restrict choice and should make changes as appropriate to encourage choice.
7. The SDE should articulate that choice options can be internal or external to the school, cross district lines, or include charter schools, vocational schools, and schools with Education and Economic Development Act (EEDA) “clusters of study.”
8. Virtual school offerings should be used to expand choice options for parents and students.
9. The SDE should pursue partnerships between public schools and private entities, ensuring that the state curriculum and state assessments are used.
10. The SDE should work with the General Assembly to identify funding sources to support planning and implementation of choice options.
11. Where circumstances warrant state-funded assistance, the SDE should study the possibilities for funding transportation costs for school choice options. If universal funding cannot be provided, the highest priority for funding should be given to geographically isolated schools or districts and those with Unsatisfactory report card ratings.